

Remarks in New York City Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

December 9, 1997

Thank you very much, Gay, for your introduction and for your superlative work. Thank you, Ambassador Richardson, for your distinguished representation of our country and for the campaign speech you gave for Gay—[laughter]—proving that diplomacy and politics can never be fully separated and shouldn't be. Thank you, Mr. Morgenthau, for all you have done for the people of New York and for the contributions that you and your family have made which are memorialized in this wonderful place. And I thank you and David Altshuler for the tour I had before we started tonight.

I'd like to thank the others who are here in our administration who have worked on areas of human rights: OAS Ambassador Victor Marrero; ECOSOC Ambassador Betty King; Ambassador Nancy Rubin, our representative to the U.N. Human Rights Commission. And I'd like to say a special word of thanks to John Shattuck, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, who has really worked hard for a very long time under enormously adverse circumstances, sometimes when his President couldn't do everything he wanted him to do. Thank you, and God bless you.

I thank Congresswoman Nita Lowey for being here and for her alert leadership on so many issues. And we thank the President of the General Assembly and all the members of the diplomatic corps who are here as we launch the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As human rights advocates, defenders, and educators, more than anyone else, the people in this room and those whom you represent give life to the words of the Universal Declaration. You shine the light of freedom on oppression, speak on behalf of the voiceless, spark the conscience of the world. Again I want to thank Gay for her tireless commitment to justice and equality. But I thank all of you for the work you do every day to make human rights a human reality.

The idea of a global declaration of rights emerged from the trauma of global war in which human rights were the first casualty. Here at

the Museum of Jewish Heritage, we remember the evil of the Holocaust. But thanks to the marvelous conception of this unique place, we can also celebrate the strength of the human spirit, the will to endure and to preserve human dignity.

Under the wise, compassionate leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, half a century ago 18 delegates from China to Lebanon, Chile to Ukraine forged the first international agreement on the rights of humankind. On December 10th, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration without a single dissenting vote. I am very proud that the First Lady, who has traveled the world to advance human rights, especially for women and young girls, will take part in tomorrow's United Nations commemoration.

Over the past half-century, the declaration's 30 articles have formed a constellation of principles to which all people can aspire. They have entered the consciousness of people all around the world. They're now invoked routinely in constitutions and courts. They set a yardstick of humanity's best practices against which we must all now measure ourselves.

But as Eleanor Roosevelt said, words on paper bring no guarantees, and I quote, "unless the people know them, unless the people understand them, unless the people demand that they be lived." Promoting respect for human rights is a fulfilling, but never fulfilled, obligation. Fifty years since the charter was forged, communism has been discredited, but threats to freedom and human rights still persist. Human rights are still at risk from Burma to Nigeria, from Belarus to China. Although more than half the world's people now live under governments of their own choosing, democracy's roots are still fragile in some countries. Others are besieged by forces ranging from drug cartels to organized crime. And even in democracies, human rights, which so often mean minority rights, are not guaranteed.

And while we celebrate the end of communism and the fact that it's enabled so many people to affirm their special differences, religious, ethnic, and cultural, we have also seen

from Bosnia to Rwanda that old hatreds can become the newest human rights abuses. And let us remember in this museum that having a people who are well-educated and prosperous, even having a government that is popularly elected are not in themselves sufficient to guarantee human rights.

But let us also remember that being educated by Western standards and prosperous are not necessary conditions for human rights or for people who want them. Men and women from Cambodia to Romania, Argentina, South Africa, and Russia have shown that, regardless of the economic condition of a nation, freedom is not—contrary to what the critics of the declaration say—an American or a Western or a wealthy nation right; it is a human right and a universal aspiration.

Advancing human rights must always be a central pillar of America's foreign policy. Looking back over the last 5 years, we see notable achievements; we also see missed opportunities. And looking ahead, we see an enormous amount of work still to be done.

I am proud that we stood down a brutal dictatorship and restored Haiti's destiny to its own people, but there is more to be done there if democracy and economic prosperity and basic human rights are to be safeguarded. I am proud of the role of the United States in stopping the unspeakable slaughter in Bosnia, the bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II, a veritable case of human rights abuses. But now we have to persevere in strengthening Bosnia's democratic institutions, promoting its reconstruction, enabling refugees to return to their homes, helping those who can't, building institutions of democracy that have real integrity and durability. This year, the United States resettled 22,000 Bosnians. Next year, there will be more.

We also have to keep striving to bring to justice to those who caused the bloodshed, not only because it's right but because it is necessary for full reconciliation. Our Nation is now the major contributor to the international war crimes tribunals. We'll increase our support next year. We must bring Bosnia's war criminals to justice. And I believe strongly that before this decade and this century end, we should establish a permanent international court to prosecute crimes against humanity. This week delegates from many nations are meeting to undertake that task. The United States strongly supports them.

We have led in strengthening international institutions, including the creation of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. Now, we have to ensure that Mary Robinson has the resources to do her job, and I am committed to increasing substantially America's support for that effort.

We've put the promotion of women's rights in the mainstream of American foreign policy, and I am very proud of that. This was highlighted, of course, by the First Lady's speech in Beijing, but I want to emphasize its major elements. We want to lead the world's efforts in combating trafficking in women. We want to steer more of our assistance to women and young girls. We want to recognize women's roles as democracy builders by encouraging full political participation.

Now, as I urged a year ago, I call on the Senate to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Surely, this is not an issue of party but of principle. It is time to show the world that America joins those 161 countries which have gone on record to oppose discrimination and violence against women around the world.

We continue speaking out for human rights without arrogance or apology, through our annual human rights reports, in meetings with foreign officials, in intensified advocacy for religious freedom around the world. As long as America is determined to stand for human rights, then free people all around the world will choose to stand with America.

But for all our efforts to prevent abuses, promote accountability, and push for reform, enduring progress must come from changes within the nations themselves. Democracy, the rule of law, civil society: Those things are the best guarantees of human rights over the long run. We have helped democracies on every continent solidify their reforms. We are working with China to promote the rule of law and institutions which will regularize it. We're helping post-conflict societies, like El Salvador, Bosnia, Rwanda, Mozambique, to build a durable foundation for peace. We support NGO's working to support human rights and political liberalization. And we want to expand these efforts.

Supporting the spread of democracy, with respect for human rights, advances the values that make life worth living. It also helps nations in the information age to achieve their true wealth, for it lies now in people's ability to create, to

communicate, to innovate. Fully developing those kinds of human resources requires people who are free to speak, free to associate, free to worship, and feel free to do those things. It requires, therefore, accountable, open, consistent governments that earn people's trust.

The key to progress on all these issues is for government and civic groups to work together. The NGO community is a vital source of knowledge and inspiration and action. We will keep faith with those working around the world, often at tremendous personal risk, for change within their societies. And in this 50th anniversary year, Amnesty International has asked world leaders to affirm that we will do all we can to uphold the principles of the Universal Declaration. I make that pledge to you today.

Finally, I commend the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Foundation for their efforts to teach a new generation of Americans that the future of human rights is in their hands. Eleanor Roosevelt understood that our greatest strength abroad was the power of our example at home, our commitment to work together, across the divides, to create one from many and opportunity for all.

I believe our Founding Fathers knew a long time ago that their dedication to form a more perfect Union was an intentional statement of the English language; that is, they knew that there would never be a perfect Union but that we would always have opportunities to make it more perfect in every age and time. And so let us here who are citizens of the United States honor this 50th anniversary by promising ourselves that we will always strive to make a more perfect Union here at home; to be a better model of liberty and justice; to be living proof to the cynics and the tyrants of the world that economic growth and constitutional democracy

not only can go together but in the end must go together; to prove that diversity is not a source of weakness but a source of strength and joy; to prove that out of harmony of different views, there can be a coherence of loyalty to a nation stronger than anything that can ever be enforced from above.

America has its own challenges today. We have our hate crimes; we have continuing discrimination. But we also see across party lines and across the region broader support for the "Employment Non-Discrimination Act," a new determination to eliminate all last vestiges of discrimination against women, a genuine depth of popular interest in resolving the racial divides which continue to bedevil us, and a genuine interest and understanding in the increasing racial diversity that is shaping our country for the 21st century in ways that present not only racial but cultural and religious challenges and opportunities we have never known before.

There is plenty for us to do. And it is our responsibility to do it, to dedicate ourselves, in other words, to the eternal quest of a more perfect Union and the lasting goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:55 p.m. in the Museum of Jewish Heritage. In his remarks, he referred to Gay J. McDougall, executive director, International Human Rights Law Group, and candidate for membership on the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Bill Richardson; Robert M. Morgenthau and David Altshuler, chairman of the board and director of the museum; Ambassador Betty E. King, U.S. Representative to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); and Minister of Foreign Affairs Hennadiy Udoenko of Ukraine, U.N. General Assembly President.

Remarks to the Bronx Community in New York City *December 10, 1997*

Thank you. Carmen was great, wasn't she? Let's give her another hand. *[Applause]* I thought she was great. Thank you. Thank you, Genny Brooks, for your vision and for your persistence. Thank you, Paul Grogan, for your vi-

sion and your persistence. The whole approach of LISC was years and years and years ahead of Government, and what we have essentially tried to do is to get all of our Government